

Black Parade

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Black Parade

by [Aguagi](#)

Summary

Matoi Ryuuko- courier of illegal documents and mediator between shadowy contractors and a land run by Revocs. Kiryuuin Satsuki- heiress to Revocs. Their paths cross in a break-in gone bad.

Chapter 1

Breaking into the manor was easy- it was a simple matter of stalking her target for weeks on end, placing a trojan into a personal computer, and learning almost everything about the woman's habits just by going through numerous pages of browser history and observing almost everything she did in her daily routine. Memorizing her schedule and slipping in when she retired for the night and concentrated the majority of her protectors around her quarters in the name of personal security was just for professionalism's sake- the less casualties there were, the less mistakes she could make while killing them to prevent them alerting others. In general, the better choice.

The extraction, however? Definitely hard. Between the roving hordes of patrolling guards, the hulking gorilla of a man stomping about the place, and the ridiculously difficult security measures the CEO had in place, it was a wonder that she had even obtained the amount of information she stole, much less accepted the job in the first place. That raging swordsman that came after her and woke the entire place up with his excited combative shouts when he had accidentally stumbled into the CEO's room while she was rifling through the papers on her desk had certainly convinced her that this woman was utterly mad. Perhaps charging 150 million yen for her services was setting the bar much lower than she wanted.

The target- Kiryuuin Ragyou. Reason for theft- Monopolistic hold on textile industries worldwide, corruption of the police force, a heavy hand in the alleged murder of several international high-class businessmen, and bankruptcies of several dozen legitimate business through trumped-up charges and a heavily biased court system. An impossible figure to bring down, much less steal from. Her hand had stretched into international waters and muddled them with one touch of her fingernails, poisoning even the likes of the Interpol.

But the client was ridiculously wealthy and adamant that she break into the CEO of Revocs house herself and retrieve all information regarding the murder of a personal relative. It wasn't as if Ryuuko was deaf to his order for help- she had been affected by the Kiryuuin greed as well. In fact, her ailing father had returned to his store one day to find the doors barred, his house repossessed, and all his financial assets illegally seized. The jobs themselves were deathwishes, but the reason why she had taken up such a dangerous career was because it paid well. And because of this, her father was able to purchase another house and maintain a smaller store selling handmade pottery rather than the expert tailoring and unique custom clothing he so favored doing.

An extra 450 million yen was offered if she managed to assassinate the queen bitch herself- the cherry on a cake and a definite addition to an already complicated job that would have

made her retire and live an ultra comfortable life- had she actually managed to sneak by those brainless drones patrolling the area and strangle her.

She reached for the bead in her ear- a small device that could easily be overlooked in a cursory check but not so for more observant guards- and lightly pressed a roughened finger against it. Her low, husky voice filled the air as she whispered into the commsys, and deep blue eyes suspiciously flitted towards the dark corners of the alley out of sheer force of habit.

“Suzume to Jiro. Reporting in. On schedule. Prepare for exfiltration.”

“On my way,” a deep voice replied monotonously, and the feed went silent.

Ryuuko adjusted the carrier bag nestled against her side, unconsciously running a hand through the bag’s contents until she re-locked it, satisfied that all was in order. Two large USBs worth of information stolen right off of her servers, five folders, and a fat stack of papers detailing multiple plots of forced business assimilation, receipts of bribes, and messages detailing the specific methods to murder targets. And just to rub salt into the wound and avenge her father, stolen copies of all fashion designs marked for release within the next couple of years - the original copies having been long destroyed at her hand and all accompanying servers playing a part in their corrupted scheme permanently put out of commission as well.

Slipping into an adjacent alley, she allowed herself a rare smile. The household that she left behind was waking up, the roaring confusion exulted from the butlers and guards alike grew fainter as their distance grew. Come the morning sun, the full extent of damage she wrought would be discovered and countermeasures undoubtedly enacted. But by then, she would be long gone, sitting comfortably in a first-class seat on a flight out of the country while the heat died down and sipping a glass of sake. She turned the corner...

...And found the wind knocked out of her. Ryuuko coughed as her solar plexus was dealt a blow in succession, staggering back. She blindly lashed out, finding her attack prematurely halted by a hand wrapping around her wrist. A second punch from the other hand ended in the same manner. Her commsys crackled to life, the same deep masculine voice informing her of his changing position as her assailant switched her grip so that both Ryuuko’s wrists were held within a single hand.

Ryuuko struggled against the tight, unnatural grip the other's hand had on her wrists, only ceasing her efforts upon the sound of a gun's safety being disengaged and the feel of a handgun's muzzle pressing against the hollow of her throat. The light of the adjacent building provided revealed insight to her attacker's identity, and she sighed in irritation, recognizing the face that was plastered across thousands of billboards and magazines and adverts worldwide.

"Kiryuuin Satsuki," she mumbled. "I should have realized."

Of course. If there was only one person in that mass of idiots that had to track her down before the job was completed, it had to be *that* overzealous perfectionist bitch.

"This exchange is monitored by an elite sniper. Attempt to retaliate, and I guarantee you will be killed instantly. Comply, and you will be left unharmed and brought to the authorities. Understand?"

Ryuuko mutely nodded as best she could with a pistol against her body, thickly swallowing a wad of saliva and wisely deciding to take the woman's threat at face value. Kiryuuin Satsuki was not one person to bullshit around- if she voiced a threat, there would be an army backing up even the smallest of claims. Ryuuko's stare eventually transitioned to a sword resting comfortably against the Kiryuuin's hip, attached to the body with a sturdy cloth sash. She stared at the sheathed katana nervously, dilated eyes flicking back between the armed woman and her weapon. She licked her lips and tried to ignore the beads of sweat forming at her forehead.

"Hey, uh... You're not going to decapitate me with that are ya?"

The elder opted not to respond to such an idiotic question. Keeping the gun pressed against the soft of the smaller's throat, she advanced, hand outstretched towards the courier bag and fingers splayed in anticipation. Ryuuko sucked in a breath as the ebony-haired woman drew uncomfortably close, masking her anxiety and the rising tide of adrenaline by looking away, pretending to remain submissive. Her foot scraped against the wall and ground forward, gauging how much room its owner had to act.

She couldn't go to jail- undoubtedly, the corrupt force would attempt to execute her on the spot, have her massacred by the press and left as an example to those that stood in Revocs'

way, or leave her with a weight wrapped around an ankle as she drowned in the bay. No way were they going to wait for a trial, even though judge and jury were all bought out. And in this position, the sniper Kiryuuin had claimed to be watching them couldn't fire her weapon- Satsuki would be too physically close to engage.

Just as the elder's digits reached for the silver clasp binding the top portion of the bag to its main body, Ryuuko jerked to attention. Her knee drove up- hard- into the other's crotch, stunning her if but for a second. The gun discharged, the bullet smashing against the ground and burrowing into the soil rather than the courier's flesh. The heiress's hand released the shorter woman's wrists, and she swore as her pelvic bone throbbed and pain raced through her nerves.

Before she could fully regain her bearings, Satsuki found her opponent's raised leg wrap around hers and pull. With an audible roar of outrage, she fell onto a knee, the limb swiftly disengaging as her own legs fell out of place from under her. Without missing a beat, Ryuuko solidly planted a foot against her chest and kicked her away, finally gaining enough space to spring onto a steel garbage can dumpster, jump to a window ledge above, and scale it.

Nonon's rifle barked once, and the pinkette swore as her bullet missed her target by a mere centimeter. She pulled the bolt back with deft fingers, teeth grinding against the cigarette lodged between two incisors, and practically smashed her face against the scope to line up another shot.

Ryuuko continued to scale the building, swinging her body and letting it fly in random directions just to piss the sniper off. Pulling herself over the edge, she hurled herself over and continued running on the rooftops just as another 50 caliber bullet dug into the wall beneath her knees, vaulting onto adjacent buildings. From the mad stampede of footsteps behind her, she guessed she was being pursued. Daring to turn her head, she observed the Kiryuuin heir following behind her, also vaulting over the various rooftop obstacles. Figures that she would also know parkour.

But Ryuuko had scoped this area out before and practiced her route, putting her at a significant advantage above the woman and her accomplice. She changed directions frequently and doubled back on her paths, confusing the other and causing all the sniper's shots to miss. She smirked as their distance grew, Satsuki becoming a blip in the dark backdrop of the sky, and adjusted her route to her final destination.

But as fate would have it, Ryuuko's luck ran out just as she landed on a nineteen-story commercial building. The sniper's eighth bullet successfully bit into the meat of a calf, and Ryuuko swore as she was downed in an instant. Pain exploded through her body and she screamed bloody murder as bone shattered and red blossomed on her skin, bleeding into the dark material and staining it. Her vision blurred and darkened at the edges. With titanic effort, she dragged herself over to the corner edge, letting her upper half rest against the roof access's concrete stairwell structure.

With her teeth, she ripped off part of her outfit from around the shot leg. Hands trembling, she managed to tie the cloth around the wound, hopefully staunching its flow. She flashed a tired smile as Satsuki finally arrived and advanced to her position, undoubtedly bringing along with the certain possibility of a very painful death. But the young woman didn't care. She had reached the drop-off point, and that was all that mattered. With the last of her remaining strength, she reached for the commsys in her ear with one hand and shrugged the bag off with her other shoulder, letting the straps messily pool onto the limb below. She pressed it, and let it and the accompanying hand fall.

The neat, efficient sound of clacking heels grew louder and stopped a meter before her crumpled form. She looked up, finding the Kiryuuin Ragyou's loyal lapdog and soon-to-be-COO menacingly standing before her. Ryuuko wheezed, the pain intensifying upon prolonged contact with the cold surface of the roof.

"I guess that's it for me, huh? Well, the least I can do is try to make myself more dignified and make one last grandiose speech before death, like they do in movies. Well, here. Humanity lights the flares of its existence with hand grenades and flamethrowers. Time crawls by in an hourglass, the sands of time soon sweeping away... What is the present but an illusion, a future past...?" she hummed, looking up at the dark sky above, the heavens visible through a thin cloud cover. "The moths look beautiful in the moonlight tonight, don't they? Shame they have such short lives. They'll never be able to roost in the same spot again for as long as they exist."

The glint in Satsuki's eyes turned colder and her entire demeanor shifted. In a flash, the younger found the tip of a blade pressed against the indentation the handgun made earlier. Ryuuko stared at her visage reflecting against the black steel, marred only the slightest bit by the gentle curvature towards the cutting edge. Satsuki snarled, all pretense of a calm, collected young woman vaporized.

"Save it. You will hand over the contents of your bag and be allowed to live your life in a maximum security prison, or face instant death. Your choice."

Ryuuko merely smiled, for her intelligibly nonsensical message was not for her, but for her partner waiting below, wherever he was. ***‘I am at the agreed drop point. I am going to die soon. Don’t come back for me.’***

“Urgh... heh... heh... ugh... huh... I choose... .. I choose... death...”

She tossed the battered bag over the side of the building with a pained grunt, where a dark figure effortlessly snatched it midair from his position on a nearby rooftop. One of Satsuki’s generous eyebrows rose in surprise at the act, and shot up even higher as he merely turned tail and left instead of helping his incapacitated partner. Ryuuko laughed at the sight, grinning in triumph as she ground her commsys against the rough roofing, destroying it and preventing it from being examined. Her mocking turned harsher when Senketsu completely vanished from the area and the sound of squealing tires on a motorcycle soon filled the air. She closed her eyes and maintained her smug, self-assured grin, making sure her prominently sharp incisors caught the moonlight.

“Heh... heh... heh... Kill me if you wish, Kiryuuin. That bitch is going down either way, and your company with it. There's enough evidence in there to bring her to international court and completely ruin her company.”

Satsuki opened her mouth to reply, but Ryuuko’s hearing, muffled and long dulled from pre-syncope made her words muted and indistinguishable. She laughed once more over the elder’s speech, the dark waters of unconsciousness threatening to claim her. And with that, her vision completely failed, and the paltry remnants of awareness fled her. The taller of the two pulled her sword back as the other’s head lolled to the side and brought the unconscious woman’s upper body crashing with it. Her nose wrinkled in disgust and she sheathed her blade.

Reaching into a hidden pocket, she extracted a burner cell phone and dialed it, frowning against the receiver. A cool, level voice greeted her after the first ring, clearly discernible despite the whirring hum of many servers around its owner.

“Lady Satsuki. What can I do for you?”

Satsuki reached down with her free hand and picked up the fallen courier's body with little effort, letting her limp form balance on a shoulder like a sack of flour.

"Tango down and in my possession. Prepare the extraction. Medical supplies and a medic onboard if possible."

"And the intelligence?"

Her grip on the phone increased, the screen and casing cracking against the increased pressure. She noticed and silently exhaled to calm herself down, forcing her muscles to relax.

"Failed retrieval."

The quiet shuffling of papers on a desk answered in lieu of an actual vocal response. This stunt the annoying little courier pulled had thrown their own plans and set them back by a considerable amount.

"I've notified Gamagoori. He will arrive in five minutes via one of the unbranded SUVs to make your requested escape inconspicuous. He will be arriving at the corner of the block you're currently at, near the Toho bank. Police scanners are buzzing- Nonon's bullets had unfortunately attracted several dozen individuals' attention and they called for officers to investigate. Is there anything else you require?"

Satsuki shifted her gaze onto the sleeping woman's face. The moonlight reflecting off shoulder-length midnight blue locks and pale face highlighted her calm features. Her body rhythmically moved in tune to her breathing- a sure sign that she was still a long way from death. How *fortunate*.

"Prepare a chamber and a welcoming committee. I'm sure our new... guest... will want a warm welcome when she arrives. Do *not* inform Ragyou of my involvement or engagement with the target at all. I want all our dealings with this... messenger... to be absolutely private."

“Understood. Inumuta out.”

Satsuki turned off the burner phone and shifted her captive's weight so that she now held her in a fireman's carry, ignoring the blood that seeped into her clothes. She strode purposefully down the fire escape towards her destination, millions of new possibilities flitting at a lightning pace through her mind. The break in, the skill this scruffy woman showed in managing to infiltrate Revocs' systems, the amount of data she escaped with, and the abilities she had displayed while fleeing and successfully evading an *elite* sniper... No doubt that this woman would have to be factored into their plans. But for now, there was a long day ahead of her, a CEO to report to, and a full line of questioning for this interfering bug about her past training, as well as the companies she worked for.

Chapter Notes

This story was originally published December 15, 2015. Development for chapters 2 and beyond started August 14, 2016, with large lapses in writing lasting several weeks in-between. I originally had no intention of continuing it past a one-shot, and even when people expressed interest in it, I didn't really want to make one, not knowing where to go in terms of storyline until fairly recently. Or not having enough love for the show to write out another serious multichapter fic (and I still kinda don't).

So this will most likely be my swan song, paired with Across the Stream. I don't remember why I became attached to the show in the first place, but perhaps this is one last token of appreciation.

Special thanks are in order to MarshmallowGoop for beta-reading and dedicating many hours of work to improving my writing, Aceina and jadzjewels for story direction and motivation, Hox for combat simulations, and Kamui_Junketsu and Ryuu/BlindYakuzo for support.

For WeazelBeater, who made me un-retire by virtue of idle conversations

尽未了所毁灭的仇敌，就是死
天鵝之歌
给老子在这停顿
对面那个純潔流子

ی خسته مونه هم قفس

خسته نشو، پرواز کن

پرواز کن تا تو منم با تا هام آواز هام نفس

خسته نشو، خسته نشو، سکوت است فریاد کن

تا منو دری، در طول تا الف موسسه قفس آزاد کن

“Black Parade” (2011)

Outer Heaven.

Paradise on Earth.

A thumb twitched, burst of warmth flaring into existence when the nail caught gouged metal and depressed the lighter's tab. Fire steadily burned in a small column, highlighting unnatural blue hair and youthful features - a diamond-shaped face, pointed nose, and full lips. He dipped his head, allowing the tip of the cigarette to sit firmly within the soft flame for a few seconds before pulling away. Taking a slow drag, he flicked the metal cap back on the lighter, relishing the familiar taste of nicotine as he eyed his surroundings, leaning against the barside's glassy wraparound.

Rather than a series of grimy dark rooms lit only by gaudy neon lights and crammed with enough people to break more than a handful of fire occupancy codes, the nightclub was dressed in a wide gradient of warm colors and attended to by the very privileged few who were lucky enough to catch the eye of the most important woman in the world. In place of shadowy dealers doing flesh by the pound, businessmen of all ages relaxed on sofas made of imported leather, casually discussing business deals in between measured sips of alcohol. Multi-tiered chandeliers of glass and crystal hung from an ornately decorated ceiling, each one of them surely worth at least a new car. Waiters dressed in tuxedos patiently stood by walls of carved mahogany and bubinga, serving platters readied with flutes of champagne. There was plenty of class here, and enough excessive wealth flaunted by the present elite to fill the coffers of a small country for entire years.

His escorts sat by his side, happily chatting away in his ears despite his lack of response. While he would normally indulge them and lavish them with attention until the sun inevitably peaked over distant hills, tonight was an exception. Tonight had electricity in the air, an invisible force that made the hairs at the back of his neck stand up and prickled at his skin. Tonight, his understudy was going to be evaluated, pressed beyond their limits through hell and high water.

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the attendants, ignoring the surprised and somewhat disappointed looks on their faces until he was left to smoke his cigarette alone. Gently

tapping his emptied glass against the glossy wraparound, he caught the attention of a certain pitcher-holding bartender and coolly tipped it in his direction. Ignoring the peeved expression that flitted on the tuxedo'd man's face, Aikuro watched him refill it, almost transfixed at how perfectly the clear liquid waterfalled onto ice cubes. Slightly swaying in his bar seat, he stared as clear droplets cascaded out the bottle and mirrored the pink and orange LEDs positioned above the bar, almost startled when the glass neatly slid in front of him. Now nursing a newly refilled cup of shochu, he raised it to smooth lips to drink deeply from it, only half-listening to the TV as it droned on in the background.

“ -night's segment, we have a special guest appearing on this show. This woman is undoubtedly the face of the most important clothing company in the world and the leader of seven new trailblazing fashion lines. Please welcome the esteemed Kiryuuin Ragyou as we - ”

Slowly shaking his head as the woman strutted onto the stage like an arrogant peacock and sidled up next to the host, he turned away from the pre-recorded show in barely concealed disgust, not at all interested in scripted coming-and-going-ons of his boss' boss outside of the company building.

Feeling his phone buzzing in sporadic bursts against his leg, he released another puff of smoke in resignation and craned his neck to briefly stare at the decorated ceiling as if offering silent prayers to the renaissance-dressed people painted there. Withdrawing a shard little bigger than his hand from the suit's pants pocket, he slid the two black metal ends apart and watched as light assembled, forming a softly-glowing screen that waited, patiently humming. Staring at the specialized phone's dimmed display for a long minute, anxiety bubbled in his gut like a cramming student before their final exam, legs uncomfortably shifting where they sat on the chair.

In. Out. One breath to (hopefully) calm his nerves.

He steeled himself.

This was it. **Show time.**

The screen flared to life at his touch, bar lights above dully reflecting off the curved, polished surface that hugged the phone. Idly scrolling past the wall of messages from his manager

reminding him of an upcoming formal attire photoshoot, he pursed his lips upon finding and reading an innocuous-looking series of texts sent from his *other* manager.

'Your niece is ill and won't be able to visit today.'

The doctor suspects that it's a chronic infection. Not well studied so can't make clear diagnosis yet.

She'll be in isolation. Don't know how long for. He says it's "Guilongyuan syndrome," or something like that. Call me later.'

Mikisugi paused, a massive weight settling comfortably in his chest as darting eyes read the last sentence over and over, burning the typed words into his mind's eye until he could clearly see them even with his eyes closed.

Guilongyuan syndrome.

The world seemed to freeze the instant its meaning slammed into his skull with the force of a rushing train, time forever trapped in that sliver of a microsecond. The busy bar around him seemed to fade away from his consciousness. Men and women paused mid-toast with their glasses raised, words lost in the enclosed space to deaf ears. Frames stilled in their television screens, the gaudy-looking CEO looking especially perverse with her smug smile and knowing eyes, somehow mocking his plight - especially when it was *her* company who was unknowingly testing his understudy.

He knew very much what Guilongyuan syndrome meant.

His thumbs hovered over the keyboard that materialized under the sent text, twitching the slightest bit with his inability to quite form a coherent thought. Aikuro hesitated, wrestling with himself for the briefest of minutes before tapping out a brief reply - the only series of words that readily coalesced.

'I see.'

Immediately, he chastised himself for lack of decorum. How *easily* had it come from his fingers, etched forever into the digital void. Fingers curled into fists and dug deep into palms as their owner tensed in intense disgust, watching as ‘message read’ appeared next to his message. Nervously grated against skin, when animated bubbles signaled a forming reply. Tapping against the bar surface when more bubbles appeared and disappeared in intervals before stopping altogether. Where the text box remained still. Waiting.

I see. I see!/? Is that really all he could think of saying right now!/?

Incisors worked against the cigarette’s thin paper covering, nearly ripping into its filling as another sudden pang of self-hatred and disgust jolted through him like a bolt of lightning. Knuckles whitened, hand trembling around the specialized cell phone. The bar started to fade in and out of focus, an intensifying ringing settling in his ears “settling in his ears as his body suddenly grew hot - sweating even with the rather chilly temperatures the management set the room to.

The kid he helped raise from when she was little more than able to walk on two legs, trying his best to act like a mentor. And all he could do was see what would happen and hope to high heavens that she’d still be alive at the end of this ordeal. He hated it - he really fucking did! - the helplessness and agonizing wait.

Especially when that bitch was concerned.

But...

Shoulders abruptly dropped in resignation.

Was there anything else he could do?

Taking one last puff on his cigarette, he smashed its remains against an empty glass ashtray and drank the rest of his glass in a single gulp.

Damn it all to hell.

“Lady Satsuki,” Hououmaru greeted, briefly bowing before her charge. “Lady Ragyou has been expecting you.”

Satsuki nodded but said nothing in response, securely tucking the manilla folder in the crook of her elbow and keeping her eyes trained on the massive arched doorway. Exhaustion tugged at the edges of her mind, weighing down on her shoulders, but she steadfastly ignored such a *trivial* matter. Sparing the personal assistant a glance, she strode on through opening white-wood doors, immediately assaulted by the chatter of at least five different TV channels playing all at once.

“ - war in the Pacific intensifying on both sides of the - ”

“The public is invited to the Levenworth Foundation’s annual charity ball, dedicated to feeding and providing life-saving medication to the children of the world who - “

The older woman scowled, flaring her nose in disgust as these idiotic figureheads kept on with their useless prattling, keen ears soon picking up on the near-silent shuffling of heels on luxurious carpeting. A click of nails on plastic, and the chatter was rendered mute, newscasters rendered silent and live feeds frozen with the push of a button.

Ragyou swiveled in her chair, grave features and furrowed brows. Behind her, the many screens surrounding her office flickered, flashes of hues and shades streaking past snow white hair fringes and painting them in a rainbow cavalcade of colors. Light emanating from LEDs above highlighted her hair a blinding halogen white, adding to the effect. A man-made halo of sorts, it broadcasted her absolute power and sheer force of will - a suffocating, indomitable aura that constantly surrounded her and forced those she turned her gaze towards to bend to her whims.

“Satsuki.”

“Mother,” Satsuki demurely bid as she bowed, squaring her feet and bending perfectly at the waist, respectfully training her eyes to the floor.

“Rise.” The CEO waved her hand, too irritated to feign niceties. “Hououmaru has informed me that you wished to discuss more about our unwanted... visitor. Unfortunately, the authorities haven’t managed to locate and subdue her even with their increased patrols. I have

arranged a private conference with Commissioner Komatsuzaki later in the evening at this estate. Perhaps you can share the findings your security sector has discovered with him then.”

“Yes, mother. Security footage reveals initial break in around two thirty four in the morning, and complete departure from the premises approximately three hours later. Analysis from logs reports at least two terabytes of data stolen, but we were unable to determine how much more thanks to the intruder’s destruction of the server room after their theft.”

Ragyou’s frown deepened. Fighting to maintain decorum, she all but snarled out, “Current status?”

“The IT department is currently attempting repair and retrieval from the backup cloud-based system. As for the intruder, they were able to use the maintenance tunnels to avoid capture. We are unable to tell how they knew where the entrance to them was, along with precisely where they went due to the lack of security cameras there. However, the last recorded footage we have of them indicated that they were travelling west, potentially into the matsu gardens for a silent escape.”

A throaty growl, the curl of nails into plush leather, and the rubbery noise of complaint from the expensive fabric. “Fingerprints, pictures, distinguishing markings or other biometric modes of identification?”

A nod. The manilla folder resting on her arm is produced with a clipped flourish and sent sliding across a desk to reach her mother’s hands. Cold thin fingers adorned with many diamond rings practically tore open the stiff covering and gripped handfuls of papers plastered with a partially-masked, youthful face as they fluttered and scattered over her desktop. Lengthy nails that could only be rightfully described as *talons* crinkled and tore the printed material as their owner darkly imagined doing the same thing to that interfering wretch’s neck, murderous glee threatening to break her carefully crafted persona and make botoxed lips stretch into a wicked grin.

“Our senior analyst determines that they are female and between 20 and 35 years of age based on their stature and publically available comparisons from the national government database of females with similar heights and weights. We were able to capture her face and have passed it onto our network of private detectives. They are currently cross-referencing what little can be discerned from the footage with multiple databases through our facial recognition software. The security division was able to confirm their basic physiological attributes by comparing security footage to known object heights in the mansion: approximately 1.7 meters tall, short, dark hair, normal build. Our Information Specialist has narrowed down the possible radius of their escape to hundred kilometers; so far, no public security footage he has been able to access shows her escape by rail or by plane. Therefore, the only logical conclusion is that she had ground transport readily available to evade capture.”

A lie of sorts. Half-truths.

What the footage presented to Ragyou didn't show, however, was their personal scuffle - a frustrating and needlessly lengthy encounter that her loyal Information Specialist had carefully edited out of existence at her order.

Ragyou relinquished her grip and leaned over the polished mahogany desk as she glared over the crumpled photos with the barest hint of a snarl, tenting her fingers. "Is that so?"

"Yes. He is in contact with national authorities and leveraging Revocs' influence to expedite the investigation."

The Kiryuuin matriarch leaned away, the image of the cocky young woman still burned into her retinas. An eye twitched, bile biting away at the back of her throat.

"Excellent. Regardless of the outcome, I want a full report by the end of the day."

"Understood."

Another careless hand flick. "Dismissed. If your independent investigation manages to detain her before any of our specialized forces do, you have my permission to extract information pertinent to where their main operations lie and anyone else working for their cause using any and all methods of force. But I would like to meet her when you are finished to conduct a personal interrogation of my own."

The heiress bowed once again, the cold glint in her eyes becoming hard and resolute as she turned away and stalked through opening double doors, not bothering to spare the diminutive personal assistant faithfully positioned at their side a glance.

"Yes, mother. I promise you, I'll see to it."

"You're sure of this?"

“Affirmative.” The rough, garbled tones of Ryuuko’s running partner buzzed through the electronic vocalizer. A black-gloved hand dived into the contents of her courier bag and fished out the portable drives, plugging them into a laptop and allowing the other to connect to it directly. Hidden away in an aging safehouse, Senketsu sat back and let his handler take over, key clicks and distant button presses echoing through his headset. On the other side of Japan, Michio sat, one hand commanding the flow of data comfortably far out of the compromised Japanese government’s reach, and the other holding a lit cigarette smoldering down to its brightly colored filter.

“I can visually confirm that Kiryuuin Satsuki last had her in her possession; I saw them together using my optix when Suzume passed the package on to me. No further news has been released on any channels, so I assume that REVOCS is keeping quiet about their latest acquisition, or there is an interrogation being conducted. Perhaps an imprisonment at a punitive facility,” Senketsu added, peeling off the black face mask and taking a small relieved exhale at the gentle caress of cool air against his sweating face.

“Keeping quiet? With Ragyou at the helm? Unlikely,” Michio scoffed through the tiny speaker, grinding the cigarette remains against a battered metal ashtray. “She’s known to be obnoxiously flashy with everything she has her hands on. REVOCS capturing one of those that have been interfering with their goals no matter how insignificant the charge - especially at the scale with what we’re doing now? She would be trumpeting her possession of Zuzu, Jiro! Wrapping her in chains and parading her around the public as an example to all who cross her!”

Senketsu winced at asked, “And what do we do now?”

The keyboard clacking in the background paused, a moment’s hesitation stretching into forever. Senketsu fiddled with his suit’s reinforced stitching, the edge of a thumbnail catching and grating against dark gray fibers. Running imagined scenarios over and over in his mind. Thinking of the various ways they would take delight in torturing her. Breaking her. Killing her. Maybe devise a way to pressure her into joining their forces to train hunters into taking down other courier-runners. Or finding some way to strip her of her entire personality and have her live on as their mindless drone in that manner?

The *tink* of snapping thread jarred him out of his own thoughts, and he stared at the severed ends in mute shock. *Was he really that nervous?*

He scoffed at himself for such a ridiculous question. His best friend was just taken by *the* worst possible.

Of *course* he was nervous.

“We do nothing,” Michio eventually responded, the slight tremor in his voice barely discernable through his chosen facade of absolute calm. “There is nothing we *can* do given the size and scope of the Kiryuins’ power.”

“Nothing?”

“Precisely,” he affirmed, resuming his control over precious data with a muffled cough, “We all have understood from the very beginning the implications of what would happen if we got captured at any stage of executing this mission. The consequences. The horror *they* would inflict on us should they have a chance. And,” his voice turned quieter, more gravelly, “what *we* as a group must do when such event occurs.”

“Do we?” Senketsu questioned, fighting to keep his voice neutral.

“Do **you?** ” his handler questioned back, even tone wavering and even sounding... *sadder...? ... more depressed than usual?*

Senketsu resisted the urge to show his surprise at the tone. He had *never* heard his voice waver and crack like that, even when Rini was also disappeared by the Kiryuins. Not when Ondori and Itachi had their facility suddenly invaded and they had to destroy their precious weapons stockpiles before the Revocs’ hunter-raid team could get their filthy paws on them. Not when they had to set the abandoned factory complex they used as a base on fire just so that the scattered remains of their forces had a chance to escape.

Now he was curious.

But despite it, he held his tongue, recognizing that the man was in no mood to talk. Knowing that if he pressed the issue, his taciturn handler would instantly shut the conversation down, potentially barring off further inquiries in the future. Permanently. For a long time, Senketsu sat and instead idly listened to Michio work, trying to immerse himself in the repetitiveness of his operator's actions. But it seemed that his boss wasn't as concentrated to the task as it would be believed, long lapses between keypresses and order executions telling more than his lack of speech.

He wrestled with his tongue. And finally, he spoke. "And now?"

Michio sniffed, trying unsuccessfully to put on a disinterested air, "And now we wait."

Senketsu pursed his lips at the curt response, understanding that this was as talkative as his handler was going to get today. "Understood. Jiro out."

With that, the connection between their headpieces severed, radio bandwidths and frequencies quieted in a fraction of a second. Sighing in resignation, he laid his piece next to the humming computer, thoughts running a mile a minute.

Alone, Senketsu sat in front of the console with screens and windows controlled by an unseen force kilometers away, staring without quite seeing them. Absentmindedly, his fingers slipped along the length of his outer arm, feeling the ragged line of raised flesh through the skintight suit over and over again. A physical mark he and his companion shared, albeit in different locations and from different situations. But this one was directly from her, from her hand and desperate ambitions.

Her blessing? Or her curse?

Its sister was a similar scar that dug deep into skin over his right eye, leaving a raised pink line in its wake. It was made with every intention to blind, to punish in the most cruel of manners. To force the gaining of insight by taking sight away. His commander was most kind in that regard, he mused, to only strike at him with murderous intent - as restrained as it was - only once. Said commander had done much worse to others for lesser transgressions.

His finger paused dead center on the arm scar's mass, where a knife had slipped past padded armor and dipped into muscle. A parting swipe from the junior courier herself with his stolen blade, a memento meant at the time to permanently remind him of that day. Of his actions and betrayal of trust.

Maybe Ryuuko meant to completely cut the muscle that day, render a limb useless. Maybe -- and more likely -- she sought to simply drive him back to put enough space between the two of them so she could leap off the building they stood on and defy death once more. Maybe... maybe...

He stopped, musing interrupted by a long and open-mouthed yawn. The fog of exhaustion settled onto his mind without his notice, muscles crying out for rest and drooping lids feeling as if they were made of lead. His entire body sagged, spine almost forming a perfect 'c' as the weight of the night's events finally caught up with him. In resignation, he turned and slunk away to the shared "dormitories" - a corner of the tiny base that was too small to fit anything of importance. Foregoing the usual post-delivery shower, he headed straight for the pair of ratty twin-sized mattresses lying mere feet from each other on the floor. Bonelessly, he collapsed onto one of them, belatedly realizing that it wasn't his mattress that he landed on, not when tattered red sheets and a folded pair of yellow rabbit-print pajamas proved the contrary.

He turned onto his side and stared at the scant personal items surrounding her mattress for a very long time. She never spoke of her home life often, only mentioning her father's concern whenever she left home when she started, when she became a courier for reasons unknown to all but her. When her father would try to run after her, shouting questions on where she had been, asking what he could do to help soothe her anger. Pleading with her not to do what he thought she was going to do. Not knowing she had found out the truth of what Revocs did to her family. Not knowing that she knew the extent of their effects past the closing of the small tailor store they used to maintain together.

Wadding her blankets in the space between his curled body, Senketsu watched the hands of the scuffed, dented clock as it ticked on, counting seconds and minutes and hours in measured intervals. Burying himself up to his nose in her sheets, he took a deep breath, hoping to whatever higher power that existed (if they were any) that she would return safe and sound.

On his side of Japan, Michio finished up, executing a queueing program that would automatically publish the information gleaned that night in controlled leaks. Silently, he opened up the plain metal desk drawer at his side and withdrew from its cavernous depths an

amber-colored glass. Removing the decanter, he took a long swig, swiveling his chair to half-face away from the wall of monitors that plastered almost every inch of his work space. He eyed the exhaustive list of documents as they were copied and propagated on servers worldwide, feeling sick to his stomach as the cheap whiskey burned his nose and throat and coated his tongue with bile-like aftertaste. He gasped, reeling as the bitter feeling shot through his body, tainting his entirety with overwhelming force.

REGRET

Slumping in his chair, his gaze moved over to the single picture frame of both him and a small girl that graced the desk within the cramped room - one of the only times she actually sat still long enough for such an event to happen. Staring at the wrinkled and yellowing photograph of the young girl happily perched atop his shoulders, he sighed and massaged his temple with a hand, squeezing his eyes shut as memories flooded his mind. He could almost hear her laughter, feel her phantom weight on his shoulders as they raced through the open park that day after her impromptu trip to the gardens. Where she had the first taste of the forbidden. Where she had her first introduction to the shady underbelly that was the couriers, the secretive network of both ordinary spies and extraordinary mailmen ferrying millions' worth of yen every day in data alone.

A girl long gone and forgotten.

Michio rested his head upon a palm, slowly shaking it in resignation. Sitting in the dark, a single thought became the only thing keeping him company as endless walls of text and news feeds flickered on his screen and bathed him in sporadic flashes of colorful light.

Was it worth it?

“She is stable, for now. By sheer luck, Snake shares the same blood type as her. It’s actually kind of ironic that our resident homicidal sniper was the only one out of us who could pull her out of hypovolemic shock. She had voiced her disapproval rather colorfully, I might add,

when I proposed such a measure to her. But has also reported that the vehicular endurance tests conducted with our anti-material rifles before our... guest... showed up were successful. Toad will oversee their mass-production and your order should be added to the ground fleet between two and three months after factory refitting.”

Satsuki peered down her nose at the courier lying before her, intense gaze slowly sweeping down her unconscious body to rest on the smudged writing on her wrists. Decorating the space were barely legible scrawls of random sequences of numbers and letters - a code with an importance yet to be determined. Stripped of her suit and weapons and securely fastened to the metal examination table underneath, she looked small, deceptively harmless even. Her face and lips were still pale, the rise and fall of her chest shallow. A lone woman standing at death's doorstep and toeing its threshold. And yet still defying its decree, stubbornly clinging to life even after considerably bleeding out in the span of time before assisted medical intervention.

But despite the severe exsanguination, she actually looked better when compared to her state during extraction. The superficial cut Uzu made when he slashed his blade at her and inadvertently yanked her mask off with its tip was cleaned. Dried-over blood was meticulously wiped off by her faithful bodyguard and wounds tended to to prevent unwanted infections. Metal and plaster cast secured around the injured leg by a private medic to promote correct healing of flesh and bone alike. Perhaps a frivolous gesture now especially in the wake of such events, but one should always be sure to not compromise their assets - especially when they weren't completely secure in their grasp yet.

Her frown deepened, impressive brows knitting together in thought.

So much trouble to save the life of one person.

Which begged the question - *what to do with her when she woke up?*

“Samples of blood, hair, and skin already have been extracted from the subject, as well as other relevant biometric identifiers, such as fingerprints. Analysis of blood and DNA samples should be ready in approximately 48 hours. I have also taken the liberty of taking her dental impressions, on the off chance we could determine her identity through dental records. Most likely, she'll either be registered under a false name or a patient to an international dentist office, but it's well worth a start.”

“Tattoos, piercings?”

“No tattoos visible. Quite a bit of scarring as far as I can tell, presumably from previous altercations - something we should look into. Several superficial ones, most likely from burnings. No piercings.”

“Other distinctive markings that designate her as part of a group?”

He chanced a glance at his superior, only momentarily turning his back to her to retrieve their *guest's* folded-up bodysuit and turn it over to her possession, “Yes, actually. If you look at the small satchels lining the utility belt, you can see unusual embroidery at its underside. An odd symbol - their logo, perhaps. Based on deviations seen in the exterior design, I suggest that she may belong to a splinter group as opposed to the more well-known classes of couriers.”

Satsuki took and scrutinized them carefully. Threads comprising the stitching matched the gray-blue hue of the suit satchels' coloring despite said logo's placement making it invisible to anyone looking directly at her. Similarly, the handle of the knives in her suit pockets also bore the logo on their flanks, albeit crudely gouged in.

A thumb rubbed against embroidered fabric and scratched metal, keen eyes taking note of the eclectic design such an annoying group had chosen to possess. Rather than the simple circular logo and number combinations regular couriers bore, hers was more detailed. Symmetrical. Unmistakably unique in that the design style smacked of common graffiti by lowlifes inhabiting Japan's poorer, less maintained towns. An ornate horned skull with flaming horns glared at the viewer. Two spindly legs with clawed feet resembling a hawk's open talons sat at its base, waiting to wrap themselves around chosen prey and carry it off to a swift death at its base. The center skull was flanked by two smaller, less detailed skulls facing towards it.

Like wings, almost.

Certainly something to look into, even if they were supposedly an independent association. And if she recalled correctly, there were only few other groups that had taken up such as

ominous symbol as the *skull* to make a permanent part of their association. So perhaps their search wouldn't be as arduous as she initially assumed.

Perhaps .

Lips further pulling into a scowl, she stiffly handed them back to her talented information specialist, as if offended to have touched something belonging to someone as lowly as a simple courier.

“Cross-reference this symbol with every other known organization, doubly so in international territories, where they may have a stronger presence.”

“As you wish, Lady Satsuki. Interestingly enough, her suit is equipped with a built-in vital monitoring system and a basic distress signal emitter. However, there is no indication that the latter was ever activated; perhaps she failed to do so out of fear of the signal being traced?”

“Her companion abandoned her instead of assisting, and escaped with the stolen data without first checking if he was being followed. Perhaps she knew such a thing was futile in the scope of Revocs' power or that they would share her concerns and leave her. Nevertheless, it is a topic worthy of personal investigation.”

“Yes, my Lady. I'll alert you when she wakes up.” He paused, looking thoughtful as his superior continued to glare at the courier, deciding that now was as good of a time as any to bring his findings to her attention. “Lady Satsuki,” he slowly started, directing her attention back to the plaster cast with a flourishing hand. “This shouldn't be here right now. Snake herself had said that a shot like that with Schumann... her foot would have been all but blown off, or at least reduced to amputatable scraps. An exit wound at least a few inches long. If she used Bach instead, then maybe we would end up with the result we see before us now. But with Shumann, a .50 caliber rifle built to take out armored vehicles rather than humans... this is an impossibility.”

“Her suit. Could it have possibly negated some of the effects?”

He tipped his head towards the cloth lump in consideration, running a hand along its length and tracing a finger down an embedded wire in reverent awe. “It’s a possibility, but a *very* far stretch. It’s lined with thin sheets of kevlar. Carbide disks, ceramic matrixes... undoubtedly high-tech for what appears to be a small, independent movement. Have to let Snake run some ballistics tests on it to be sure. But the most interesting aspect of this is that her bones are already starting to knit together.”

“A healer?”

“Could she be one?” Houka rubbed his chin in consideration, voice rising in excitement as he considered the possibilities. “Possibly. The data suggests either that or the development of a serum mimicking its effects. If it's the former, I have not seen anyone else this young with regenerative abilities to this extent. Certainly rare. Odd choice for a ‘profession’ such as this.”

“Her abilities are not the priority,” Satsuki cut in sharply, glare unchanged even as her subordinate flinched at her tone and grudgingly schooled himself back into a composed persona.

‘But sill... Carbide disks...’ she thought, eyes flitting momentarily to where the suit lay draped over her officer’s arm. ‘Kevlar... A small independent movement such as this could never have procured this on their own. ...Which begs the question, where did they come from?’

“The Oxazepam sedative should be wearing off in another three hours. Not my personal first choice in use, but we will see how she fares.”

Satsuki’s lip twitched, professional facade keeping it from growing into a full on scowl. Her fingers twitched, pure dislike for the other woman sharply flaring back into existence when the absolutely *shameful* memory of this ruffian’s brief escape swam back into her mind’s eye.

“Put her into room 413. Gamagoori and I will deal with her shortly.”

“Understood.”

'How... interesting... Yet, hardly worth my time,' she thought, watching as the blue-haired specialist wheeled the unconscious woman out of the room. 'Others like her have amounted to nothing at all. Plucky upstarts with no distinguishing characteristics. Overly excessive servility when faced with the possibility of their death.'

'However,' Satsuki added, turning her attention back towards the handwritten observations her officer had dutifully recorded and scanning his notes on the courier with a critical eye, 'if she does exhibit unusual talents besides the one that allowed her to escape Jakuzure's scope, let us hope she proves to be amusing, at the very least.'

Where...?

Glossy eyes slowly slid open, blinking owlishly in chemically-induced stupor. Her back rested against polished steel, its cool surface an unwelcome addition to her body's already intense struggle with keeping warm on its own. She shivered, teeth reflectively chattering when AC fans kicked on and blew chilly air into the room, her only comfort a thin blanket providing the barest of shelter from the driving cold. Ears ringing, she strained her senses, trying to force herself to hear past the din, to listen for other people possibly in the room with her. She moved her head - or at least tried to - weakly pulling against belt-like restraints to peer down at the rest of her body.

Only to immediately snap her eyes shut when even that slight movement caused the world to turn on its head and spin in short, jerky movements - like she were rolling down a hill.

Whispers. Hushed voices that tickled at the edges of her consciousness. Pulling at her thoughts from far away. Muted words swimming all around her, monotone speech vibrating through walls and blending into each other.

I'm... alive... ?

Carefully, she cracked one open an eye, slowly scanning her surroundings. Muscles that she didn't know were strained in anticipation sharply relaxed, untensing in a single fluid wave when she discovered she was alone. The room was dimly illuminated, the single source of light streaming through a single barred, frosted window. Lining the walls were neatly organized shelves, stacked with rows upon rows of colored chemicals with labels too small for her to read. Polished metal tables similar to the one she lay on glinted dimly in what little illumination there was. Flanking their sides were small metal and wood cabinets, drawers half-pulled out and contents haphazardly strewn inside.

A clock ticked just outside her peripheral vision, and she strained her neck, trying to read its face. White-hot pain flared in response to her attempts, racing through her head. She winced, instinctively attempting to curl into herself as best as she could. Her skull throbbed, feeling as if someone were brutally striking it with a sledgehammer. So absorbed was she in her pain that she failed to notice the door quietly swing open -

- And loudly swore when the room was suddenly flooded with light, birthing a world of pain to her eyes. Blinded and hearing footsteps quickly coming closer, she immediately panicked, the unwelcome queasiness in her stomach sharply intensifying.

Instantly, hands set themselves upon her. She cried out, thrashing against the arms that tried to grab her, to hold her still. Eyes tearing up. Bile churned, stomach growling unhappily the more she squirmed. Breaths coming in rapid and shallow, eyes darting between two similarly-dressed people that laid their hands on her throat, her shoulders, anywhere they could reach. Muscles screamed as she strained against their attempts at restraint, limbs shivering as joints threatened to be pulled out of their sockets.

“Hold her arm down, hold it still, damn it!”

Unable to focus on anything *but* the pressure building in her throat, she pitched her head to the side as far as metal and leather allowed and vomited, body heaving pathetically. She yelped as her body was twisted back into position and her arm was roughly slammed back against the table, feeling something sharp roughly stab her inner elbow. She barely had enough time to process what just happened before a thumb pressed down on the syringe plunger and the cool rush of liquid flooded her veins.

Almost instantly, a weight settled upon her mind, smothering her thoughts like unyielding yar. With a faint moan, Ryuuko collapsed limply onto the metal table, body relaxing

completely to the point of being neither willing nor able to voluntarily move.

And as her senses dulled and her vision was reduced to a soft blur, the world quieted and faded away.

She regained consciousness in degrees, remaining deathly still as the dense fog clouding her mind slowly dissipated and her ears carefully mapped out environments yet uncharted. Something heavy and cold was securely clamped around her wrists, with similar vices snapped around her legs and arms. A heavy cloth was tied around her eyes, her mouth left in a similar state. Nostrils flared, lungs taking deep, slow breaths as she wracked her brain, forcing herself to remain calm. The last thing she remembered was going cold, slowly dying as her blood formed a growing puddle around her.

Slowly, so as to not alert her captor in case they were also present in the room with her, her foot stretched as far as the cuffs would allow, tendons and muscles painfully straining against the heavy metal links that bound her to the steel chair.

Clink

She swore internally, wrists painfully rubbing against cuffs as fingers strained to reach her wrists, nails just barely scraping against skin and steel in search of the thin metal tools she usually kept there.

Where is it where is it where is -

Oh, shit.

Ryuuko mentally screamed when her cursory analysis returned a glaring lack of her lock picking kit in her suit's hidden wrist pockets.

In fact, there was also a glaring lack of anything *at all*.

She paused. Wait a minute. *Why the hell was she naked!?*

Momentarily forgetting the possibility of danger, she panicked, struggling against reinforced bonds like an animal caught in a trap. Smooth stone greeted her feet. Its cold polished surface was a welcomed presence to hot flesh as toes splayed and dragged along inlaid tile as much as her restraints allowed her. Legs stretched and strained, the woman gritting her teeth as she wedged her ankles against the chair legs -

- and realized that the wound that rendered her completely immobile was no longer there.

Wait, what?

The sound of approaching footsteps caught her attention. Thoughts of further investigating her healed leg abandoned, the courier instantly froze and fell limp within her binds. Blood pounded in her ears, breath catching in her throat and apprehension not unlike a heavy weight settling atop her chest. Toes firmly pressed against the floor in terrified attempts to track the growing vibrations they made, curling inward, breaths coming in short puffs when Ryuuko realized that they were clearly coming towards *her*. The person stopped mere feet away, seemingly doing nothing *but* carefully observing her. Thin hairs lining the back of Ryuuko's neck rose. She anxiously held her breath...

... And felt what seemed like the touch of death trailing against her hot skin, analytical fingers tracing up her blood-crusted throat, where a loaded pistol had crushed against it mere hours ago. Instinctively, she stiffened, unable to repress a violent tremble as they prodded a cheek, assessing the bruised and purpling flesh with as much tenderness and care as a veteran gardener similarly inspecting their prized rose bushes.

Cold... so cold...

The newcomer seemed to take notice of her reaction, fingers pausing where they cupped her face before thankfully pulling away.

And in her moment of weakness, Ryuuko made the grave mistake of audibly sighing in relief.

SWAK!

An open palm collided against a wounded cheek, Ryuuko's shaggy hair whipping as her head snapped back. Force unbridled, force inhuman in its very nature caused her teeth to rattle and her vision behind closed lids to momentarily become white and burning in its center. She cried out, shaking in her restraints. Face flushing red and cheek throbbing, Ryuuko winced as the hand descended towards her face once more, squeezing her eyes shut and hastily turning her head away in fear. But instead of striking, the same dainty hand seized her by her chin and yanked her face towards its owner. Sighing in disappointment, her captor murmured something under her breath in a language Ryuuko couldn't understand before clawing off her blindfold, birthing a world of light and pain.

“Mmph!”

Ryuuko wriggled in her restraints furiously as what seemed like a thousand spotlights struck her right in her eyes, steel chair not even making so much as a groan no matter how desperate her flailed movements assaulted its base. Her eyes *burned*, images splitting apart before violently smashing into each other again like turbulent waves. Her captor seemed amused - wickedly gleeful, even - at her vigorous display of pain, toying with blonde hair neatly tied into a ponytail. Slowly lifting her hand once more and making sure to hold eye contact with her prisoner, she softly giggled when Ryuuko struggled and strained even harder, drawing it close.

“Shhh,” the other woman whispered tenderly in her ear. Cold and impossibly soft fingers trailed along the bony length of Ryuuko's jaw, teasing the hollow of her neck while nails pressed into it and threatened to break skin. “None of that. We don't want to bother the people upstairs now, do we?”

The other woman waited as Ryuuko instantly stilled upon her delicate but freezing touch, muscles painfully tensed and yet unmoving - a frightened rabbit caught in a prowling cat's sight. Nui smiled daintily, an all too-wide grin growing even longer and more grotesque as fearful blue eyes tracked her hand's movement and quiet whimpers muffled from cloth gags

played such sweet symphonies to her ears, especially when the little courier's eyes darted around, undoubtedly trying to think of ways to escape.

Far from a spartan concrete cell designated to break *criminals* like her, the room was richly decorated in a myriad of shelves and workbenches, tables lined with equipment she couldn't even begin to understand the workings of. A myriad of posters displaying project designs in-progress plastered sterile white walls. A wall calendar taped to one of the workbench shelves was similarly covered, heart-shaped post-it notes and indecipherable cursive all but blotting **DECEMBER 2009** and its dated grid from existence.

But why did it look so familiar...?

Why did it feel like she'd been here before?

Nui heard her prisoner release a short-but-relieved huff of air through her nose when she backed away - only to seize up once more as she stalked behind her, resting well-manicured hands on trembling shoulders.

"Su-zu-me," Nui musically hummed to herself, recalling the embroidered name on the courier's suit and letting fingers splay and trace their way along collar bones featured prominently among her prisoner's skin. She whirled away with a graceful pirouette, turning to the stripped courier's outfit and practically pressing her face against the material to better visually dissect it. "Sparrow! Such a pretty name!"

She giggled, skipping to fully stocked shelves that sat behind her *pet*, thoroughly pleased when Ryuuko twisted and squirmed in vain attempts to see what she was doing. Humming as she considered the hundreds of differently colored vials, she plucked one off a middle row, approvingly murmuring to herself as she read its label and held it up to the light. Its contents sloshed, viscous liquid seeming to shift in colors from blue to purple and back again depending on its viewing angle.

"You know," the woman whispered with a tinge of awe in her voice as she returned to Ryuuko's side. "I always wanted to change the world, make it better in *my* image. It's cruel,

you know, letting it remain how it is - good cloth being ruined by absolutely *disgusting* designs. I preferred fabrics and fashion as a child, thinking that perhaps I could make the world more beautiful.”

She turned to Ryuuko happily, the glass vial delicately tinkling as well-manicured nails lightly bounced off its sides. Hands rolled it over on palms, bringing it closer to her new playmate’s face even as the courier’s struggles increased, head frantically jerking back and whipping away as a French-tipped nail effortlessly flicked the corkwood cap off.

“I’ve never been a big fan of this - science, I mean - what with all my little playthings passing out and *dying* needlessly before I could get them fully prepped for what I had planned for them.” Nui slid onto Ryuuko’s lap and straddled her bound legs, wrapping herself so tightly around her new *pet* that their noses touched. Warm breath fluttered over a bruised nose. Perfect pink-glossed lips mere atoms away from the courier’s face pulled into a soft, genuine smile when the latter nervously tracked her movements. “I’d almost given up and thought that I’d *never* get to play.”

A silk-gloved hand swiftly undid the gag and ripped it away with an exaggerated flourish. Snaking to the back of the courier’s head, it grasped at the back of the courier’s head and yanked, Ryuuko groaning as her neck crapped and popped unhappily.

“It’s such a shame. Nobody’s ever reached this stage before.”

Wait, ‘reach this stage’? What the hell!?

Ryuuko shivered, suddenly feeling as if her blood froze in her veins as the color drained from her face, her skin turning white as a sheet. Her eyes hastily swept the length of her body, breaking out in a cold sweat when she saw dozens of small red dots lining her inner elbows - tell-tale signs of injections.

Wait, what the hell did this bitch do!?

Ryuuko whipped her head out of the blonde’s reach just as the latter reached to pry her mouth open, pursing her lips.

Nui sighed gently in disappointment, leaning away. “It’s such a shame when you finally have such a perfect subject and they aren’t even BEING!” A fist socked her right in the stomach, “COOPERATIVE!”

Ryuuko cried out in agony, glass vial immediately forcing its way past rows of teeth, its contents emptied into a resisting mouth. Satisfied, her captor threw the empty tube behind her and clamped the rogue's mouth shut before she could even think about spitting it out, pinching her nose shut with surprisingly inhuman strength. She giggled at the distressed sounds her captive made, beaming happily as Ryuuko choked, struggling to breathe.

Gasping.

Wheezing.

Suffocating.

Tears springing from her eyes, the courier thrashed. Her head jerked to the side as she attempted to spit out the vile liquid, whimpering when the woman’s adamantine hold rendered her unable to. As seconds passed, it was becoming apparent to her distressed lungs that she was running out of both time and air - and that there was only one way out. With one last defiant twitch, she relented, the slow bob of her throat signifying her successful ingestion of the noxious-smelling blend.

“There,” Nui cooed, tenderly brushing hair matted to a sweaty forehead away as Ryuuko writhed within her bonds, feeling the urge to vomit and yet unable to as her stomach twisted and knotted when the liquid seemed to burn her insides raw, clawing and scraping until it bled. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“But that’s what I like about you.” Nui cooed, sick, perverted grin still plastered upon her face as her captive gagged and sputtered on the foul-tasting liquid’s remnants. Impossibly soft fingers brushing away tears gathering on her new favorite pet’s eyelids. “You’re resilient. You’re not *like* the others, you know.” Her voice dropped, perfect face uncomfortably brought closer to a pallid one. “I haven’t had anyone survive this long, not under my care. I intend to find out why. And that’s what makes you *special*. ”

A hand ghosted past the valley of her breasts and into the dip of her stomach before reaching back up to gently grasp her chin with a lover's tenderness. A thumb lightly tracing the chapped edge of a blue-splattered bottom lip, she sunnily beamed at her *petite louloutte* when the action encountered no resistance.

"I'm glad," she sighed, leaning against her heaving body and tucking the crown of her head under a battered chin. "That means we're going to spend quite of bit of time with each other, hmm?"

Her lungs were on fire.

Limbs thrashed uselessly against leather and steel restraints, straining the material but not tearing through them. Nails scratched the faux padding, leaving microscopic, upended trails of white in its wake. A massive hand firmly wrapped around her neck, keeping her head firmly submerged under the gelid water's surface despite her panicked movements. She strained once more, kicking her legs. Thin veins running along her neck bulged, popping out in stark contrast to pale, mottled skin, where newly-gained bruises colored it with blotchy purple and red. And yet she continued to drown under the eddying tides within the small pool of swirling water, a damp cloth preventing her from even sneaking in a breath in through flaring nostrils.

Eventually, her struggles became weaker and less coordinated, thrashing sputtering to a stop as corpse-like immobility took its place. And just when her sight darkened and the darkly humorous thought of dying in such a miserable place flitted through her mind, the unbelievable happened.

The hand lifted.

Ryuuko's head shot out of the pool, leather audibly cracking as she gasped for air, clear liquid spilling free from blue lips.

Her vision wobbled in and out of focus. Shadows flitted, and the outline of the woman standing before her shivered. The courier's head lolled back, drinking in more of the woman's upside-down form.

Heels neatly clacked on clean black tile. The light above cast itself upon her body like a halo, framing her disgusted expression all the more perfectly. When she spoke, it was with the very same glacial chill that sent prospective business partners cowering in their over-shined shoes, eager to placate the Kiryuuin heiress's demands (and not lose control of their bowels in the process).

“Who do you work for?”

If Ryuuko had any lung strength left from the last waterboarding dip, she would have graced that she-devil with the very waters they had used to try to murder her again. But her attempts turned out less than satisfactory, and she ended up covering her chin in frothy, slimy spit.

A backhand stung her cheek, and the flare of wounded flesh sent fires racing across icy skin. The courier instinctively tried to raise a hand to her aching face, but forgotten restraints still held it down, softly clinking metal buckles yet preventing her from doing so. Kiryuuin Satsuki’s disapproving frown intensified, and the space between her impressive brows diminished.

“State who you work for.”

“Fuck you, Kiryuuin,” she hissed, defiantly responding with akimbo middle fingers.

Steel blue eyes darkened. In a flash, Ryuuko found herself suspended against a wall with a hand around her throat, feet unable to touch the ground and a knife resting in the valley between her breasts, tapered point toying at the skin between ribs. Shredded remnants of thick brown material fluttered to the ground like snow, freed from their tethers with a quick slash of an impossibly sharp blade.

“Fool,” Satsuki softly stated, impassively staring at the scrappier woman as she scrabbled uselessly at the hand that held her pinned. Inspecting her catch for a good ten seconds, she drew closer, withdrawing her weapon and firmly pressing her body against the younger’s so as to prevent the latter from performing a repeat of her groin attack a mere two days ago. “Do not forget that you now belong to the Revocs corporation and that you live on its good graces - a shocking waste of resources on preserving your life.”

With that, she threw her to the ground, strutting out of the prison cell with nary a contemptuous look back. Ryuuko shook her damp tresses, teeth chattering from the frigid water’s chill and barely helped by the ratty towel the Kiryuuin’s guard threw her way before following his Lady. But despite it all, her pale, blued-over lips slowly stretched into a smirk.

She stole from her. She attacked her. She defied her interrogation attempts.

And lived.

And as long as she baited them with information, kept herself *interesting* in her eyes, she’d survive. And kill the bitch that killed her mom and fucked over her dad - from the inside, out.

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